

gather

FOR FAITH AND ACTION

March 2015

Living with Dying

The Practice of Feeling Pain

Comforting and Consoling

Ultimate Price

PROCESSED

FEB 09 2015

GTU LIBRARY





VOICES

Being Made New

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

We are nearing the end

of our current Bible study, “Transforming Life and Faith.” The May issue will contain the final session. Carol Schersten LaHurd, author of the study, is doing a terrific job of helping us reflect on the changes, transitions, and transformations we go through over time.

Well, *Gather* is also going through transformation! We are changing the format of the Bible study that appears in this magazine. Instead of a nine-month study and a three-month summer study, we will run several studies during the year. And we will no longer publish a separate leader guide and companion Bible. Many readers have asked that the leader information be contained in the magazine, and now we will do that.

Traditionally, we have asked a scholar, often retired, to write the nine-month study. This person has the time, experience, and academic background to write a study and leader book—as well as the freedom to travel to Bible study introductory events. We are finding it increasingly difficult to identify folks who are able to commit to such a large project.

There are many writers, teachers, and pastors who have the expertise and creativity to write a Bible study but who don’t have the time to research and write nine sessions and a leader guide.

We hope that by shortening the studies, we can get some new authors. And we think readers will enjoy hearing the

perspectives of a larger, more diverse group of writers.

We hope that by offering shorter Bible studies, we’ll make it easier for you to invite new folks to your monthly study group. It may be intimidating for new members to commit to a nine-month study; a three-session study may be a good way to create an entry point.

So in 2015–16, *Gather* is offering a Bible study in a different way, and we hope you like it. With this new format, we can cover an assortment of topics and biblical books.

In the summer of 2015, Emma Crossen, Women of the ELCA’s former stewardship director, is writing a three-session study on giving. See www.gathermagazine.org to learn more.

The Shape of the Year

SUMMER: Three sessions (June, July/August)

FALL: Three sessions (September through November)

ADVENT/CHRISTMAS: Shorter seasonal devotional (December)

WINTER: Four sessions, probably on a book of the Bible (January/February through April)

SPRING: One session, an intergenerational lesson (May)

In the fall of 2015, Liv Larson Andrews, pastor at Salem Lutheran Church in Spokane, Wash., will write a three-session study on speed and slowness, and how the Kingdom of God moves slowly, yet in our culture we are asked to move with ever greater speed. We are starting to line up future writers. Check our website for updates (www.gathermagazine.org). ☘

Kate Sprutta Elliott is editor of *Gather*.

Do you have any ideas for us as we plan? If so, send us an email at gather@elca.org and put “new Bible study idea” in the subject line.



GIVE US THIS DAY

Protect Us From Anxiety

by Audrey Novak Riley

As I write this, we've been hearing news about the Ebola virus outbreak in West Africa. Only a few people in the United States have been exposed, but many of us are worried.

Then we see other headlines—crime, corruption, disasters, diseases—what awful thing is next? The only certainty is that we'll hear all about it on the nightly news. And so we worry more.

We do have reason to be scared. There really are scary things out there, from viruses to volcanoes. And there's not much we can do about any of them besides worry, is there? Before long we start worrying about how worried we are.

Stop! There are things we can do. One of the most important of those things is prayer.

It's always helpful to pray for our brothers and sisters in times of trouble and to pray for those who rush to help. Intercessory prayer springs to our hearts and minds easily. But can we also pray that our own fears be eased?

Yes. Throughout the Bible, God's messengers tell people, "Don't be afraid." We are certainly free to pray for help with that. But how? What should we say?

There's an ancient prayer that I find comforting when I'm worried.

It seems to go back at least as far as the sixth century, possibly earlier. Some historians suggest that Bishop Gregory wrote it (see the free online resource, "Lent: Penitence, Pilgrimage, Preparation," at www.womenoftheelca.org). It appears in several old liturgical traditions as a couple of sentences for the leader to

speak near the end of the Lord's Prayer, expanding on the petition that asks for deliverance from evil.

One free adaptation goes like this: "Deliver us, Lord, from every evil, and grant us peace in our day. In your mercy, keep us free from sin, and protect us from all anxiety as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ."

First we pray for deliverance from disturbances of the peace that come from outside. Back when this prayer was written, in the last days of the Roman Empire, those would have included barbarian invasions, riots and revolts, floods and famines and fires, plagues, and pestilences: the same kinds of things we fear today, and more.

And then the prayer turns to disturbances of the peace from the inside: sin and fear. "Keep us free from sin, O Lord, and protect us from all anxiety."

We pray for God's protection not from excessive anxiety, or foolish anxiety, or even free-floating anxiety, but from all anxiety—worry, dread, nervousness—fear in all its sickening flavors.

Yes, there are scary things in the world. Yes, the sea is stormy and our little boat is often tossed. But God is with us, protecting us from all anxiety!

And then the prayer gets to the result of this protection—joyful hope. Our fear turns to joy, our worry turns to hope. That's when we *really* know that God is with us, always. 🌿

Audrey Novak Riley, Women of the ELCA's new director of stewardship, lives near Chicago with her husband and their two cats.



ROAD-READY, LIFE-TESTED

by Robert O. Wyatt

For years I've been making what I considered a self-deprecating joke about finishing my graduate degrees at a young age. I say I surely am glad that I finished my master's and doctorate when I was young and naive and thought the punishment of constant studying, competition, and academic politics all built character. Of course, there are little white lies in this quip: Far from regarding my graduate career as punishment, I loved almost every moment of it. And, I do not believe that punishment builds character.

Or, more precisely, I do not believe that punishment *always* builds character. As often as not, punishment destroys us. And so, what to do with Paul's famous dictum that "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:3-5)? What of that?

For centuries, St. Paul's words have been used by the powerful as justification for punishing the weak, the poor, minorities, slaves, servants, children, women in general, and female partners and wives in particular. Stories abound of abused spouses who are counseled by their pastors to bear their suffering quietly, to submit to their husbands in all things as the church is supposed to submit to Christ. These women are encouraged to bear their suffering willingly and to counsel their children likewise. And if they complain that their pain

is destroying their lives and making them bitter and leading them to despair and prompting them to suicide, they have been told by some clergy—not by me—that suffering builds character, or, worse, that their suffering here on earth will lead to greater rewards in heaven. They are urged to be Christ-like and bear their cross willingly. And if they can't, they may be told that they lack faith.

This is bunk and an abuse of the gospel and a horror that should not be perpetuated on anyone. Wives or partners should report the abusive spouse to the authorities and flee to safe space to protect themselves and others. And that abusive spouse—often but not always a male—should be arrested and charged.

Redemptive violence?

Sadly, we live in a culture that has also adopted the myth of redemptive violence: the belief that if we just punish or kill enough of the wrong kinds of people, we will have peace and prosperity. Worse, some Christians worship a God of punishment who visited Christ's passion and crucifixion on his own Son because God was so angry with humankind that someone had to pay the price. Sinful humanity and jealous and power-hungry imperial and religious authorities did not kill Christ. God did, for our sake. And what's good for Jesus is good for us; the more punishment we receive, the better we get. But as Dan Edwards, Episcopal Bishop of Nevada, writes in his forthright study of suffering: "The

myth [of redemptive violence]. . . invests our human worth in our capacity to kill. So we, as a nation, invest our wealth in a nuclear arsenal that would destroy every living person on earth. . . . We incarcerate more people than any other developed nation. Unlike most modern democracies, we persist in the death penalty. From the video games we sell children, to our sports, to our law enforcement, to our foreign policy, we embrace violence.... We ground our safety and our self-esteem on our capacity to kill.” (*God of Our Silent Tears*, 2013)

And all because we think that punishing others makes the world a safer and more wonderful place in which to drive ourselves crazy by accumulating more stuff, as if the consumer God will save us by giving us more stuff. Not much of a Prince of Peace.

What did St. Paul mean?

And now to that pesky passage by St. Paul and what I think it means. St. Paul, as you know, has been used to justify all sorts of ideas, some of them wonderful, some of them crazy, and some of them downright disgusting.

So let’s take a closer look at the passage on suffering from Paul’s epistle to the Romans: “. . . Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand. . . .” (Romans 5:1–2).

Because Christ is God and Christ died as one of us, at our own hand as it were, we are justified by faith. I take that to mean, we are made righteous because we trust in Christ, and trusting in Christ makes us want to be like Christ. But we can’t be like Christ by our own choice and will. We need grace from God, grace that leads to trust in Christ. So, believing in Christ is not just about being “saved” so we can die and go to heaven. It’s about being righteous, Christ-like, because we trust Jesus—but only by God’s grace. Now comes the part about suffering. The NRSV translates St. Paul as: “and we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces

character, and character produces hope. . . .” Let us then, compare a few good translations of Scripture here to get a fuller understanding of suffering, endurance, character, and hope.

First, let us remember that Paul elsewhere condemns boasting as self-glorification. But here one may boast because what one is boasting about is God’s grace, not one’s own glory. As our Bible study author Carol Schersten LaHurd, writes, “That [gracious action], says Paul, is what we have to boast about, not pride in our own merits and accomplishments. But we can boast about our sufferings to the extent that they can be part of the transformation that enables us to have hope.”

Thus, we may boast that suffering—or, following the translation in the King James Version—we may boast that *tribulation* produces endurance (NRSV) or patience (KJV) or perseverance (NIV). And perseverance produces character. Instead of character, I prefer approvedness (American Standard Version) or temptation-testedness (see Paul Borger’s blog *Bible and Translation*, <http://bit.ly/1oaDOCE>). Temptation-tested, as in road-tested automobile.

Road-tested and durable

Or to paraphrase, we may boast that our tribulation produces durability, which leads to a road-tested, factory reconditioned (by grace) and manufacturer-approved Christian. And being road-tested and reconditioned produces hope about being able to handle future challenges. And hope does not disappoint us because, because, because, St. Paul says, “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, it that has been given to us.” So it’s really about having God’s love overflowing within us, and that allows us to boast, not in ourselves, but in God.

This is not a justification of violence in the sense that the more I make you suffer, the better off you are. But it is an acknowledgment that all of us will suffer

that this cup will not pass from us—though, like Christ, we may pray that it will. But, when we suffer, by God's grace, that suffering can make us road-ready and life-tested, and that readiness leads us to hope because we are both proven and loved by God. In fact, God's love overflows in our souls.

That, alas, is the Christian hope. But in the face of that hope, we must also realize that for many people—both people of faith and people of unbelief—undeserved and unjustified suffering does not lead through grace to road-testedness and hope.

What we most often discover when we encounter those who have been abused at the hands of others is bitterness, loss of self-worth, depression, anger, and that numbness that comes from suffering so much or for so long—with no hope that God or other human beings can relieve the suffering. And we are confronted with the final indignity that those who are abused themselves so often turn to abuse others, for violence is the only way they have ever learned.

Here, we can only ponder Job and abstain from telling abused children that God will reward them in heaven for their unjust suffering. Or telling abused spouses and partners that, if they just had more faith, they would see that their tribulations are really a blessing in disguise. Or telling abused elders that God must have a reason for visiting their suffering upon them. Or telling brutalized minorities that someday they will die and find themselves in a better place. Or, worse, telling abused people that they have brought suffering upon themselves because of their own sinfulness. That is, of course, the counsel of Job's friends. And God rightly tells them that he is angry with them because they have not spoken the truth.

Long and difficult process

Of course, it remains debatable whether Job's suffering actually improved his character. Beginning to end, he insists on his own righteousness. And when God finally

appears and reveals to Job that finite human beings are simply too limited and ignorant to understand the baffling universe God created, Job doesn't get much of an answer to why he suffered.

As LaHurd rightly argues in our Bible study: "Scholars disagree about whether Job is being fully sincere when he says: 'I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes' (42:6, NRSV). But Job did get his wish to see and hear God directly, and doing so transformed Job's relationship with God. Not only that, but God commended Job for speaking correctly of God, instead of assuming that all misfortune is a punishment from God."

And, of course, what Job did speak correctly about God is that there is no connection between moral goodness and human fate.

Let us then pray for those who are abused; let us alleviate their suffering; let us condemn those who make them suffer. And let us pray for grace for all God's children with the hope that, to quote the Common English Bible, "trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope."

Let us also know that, even when grace comes, forgiveness of abusers and reconciliation with those who have made us suffer is a long and difficult process requiring courage, honesty, self-examination, perseverance, mediation, and great pain—as, for example, the process practiced by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission whatever its limitations. Let us admit that we as individuals and as a nation have never owned up to our crimes of slavery against African Americans and genocide practiced against Native Americans, and the violence we have committed in the name of God.

But let us know that truth and reconciliation are God's way and one essential means by which we can gain hope. 🌿

The Rev. Robert O. Wyatt is associate priest for outreach and adult formation at Grace Episcopal Church, Hinsdale, Ill.

A VIOLENT WORLD

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACT

by Nancy J. Goldberger



EDITOR'S NOTE: The ELCA Church Council has authorized a social message on gender-based violence. Messages are adopted by the Church Council to encourage learning and moral discourse. The tentative timeline calls for a message or messages to be considered by the Church Council in April of 2015. To learn more, visit <http://tinyurl.com/m8y1ptg>.

There are a number of areas in which overt discrimination against women is enshrined in laws, restricting women's civil, political, economic and social rights. Reforming laws that explicitly discriminate against women is one important step in addressing gender based bias in the rule of law.

—UN WOMEN, 2011–2012 REPORT ON THE PROGRESS
OF THE WORLD'S WOMEN (WWW.UNWOMEN.ORG)

MORE THAN A CENTURY HAS PASSED

Since women first began gaining the right to vote in national elections. Except in a couple of areas (Saudi Arabia and Vatican City), that right to vote is shared across the globe. In the past 100 years, great progress regarding women's involvement in politics and elected positions has been made. Likewise, the economic, social, and cultural rights of women have improved (UN Women, <http://tinyurl.com/ler9t6g>). These changes have helped ease some of the suffering many women across the globe endure daily.

Despite this progress, violence against women continues. In the United States, daily headlines report acts of violence against women. A professional football player knocks his fiancé unconscious in a hotel elevator. A teen murders his girlfriend's mother and stuffs her body in a suitcase. A former spouse stalks and beats his ex-wife.

This kind of physical and emotional suffering happens in our neighborhoods, our country, our world—and sometimes our own homes. Violence touches all social and economic classes. No group is immune, and many who suffer, do so in silence. Being abused is emotional and terrifying, and it often seems impossible to escape the abusive situation. However, learning to understand the violence is an important step in stopping it.

The global and U.S. picture

Violence against women is not new. It takes many forms and is a part of life for many women around the world. What is relatively new is that people are more aware of the issue. Laws have been enacted to give women ways to protect themselves against their abus-

ers. Awareness of violence against women is critical, but it can be disturbing as well. Acknowledging that a neighbor, friend, or family member is being abused or is an abuser is distressing.

A 2013 global review shows that “35 percent of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual...violence,” according to UN Women (<http://tinyurl.com/nhzz6py>). The website continues, “However, some national violence studies show that up to 70 percent of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime from an intimate partner.” Considering these facts, it is likely we may know someone who is in an abusive situation.

To get a sense of this global problem, consider these facts taken from the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (<http://tinyurl.com/c7zuxqw>):

GLOBAL FEMICIDE (THE MURDER OF WOMEN)

In Guatemala, **two women are murdered on average, each day.**

In India, **8,093 cases of dowry-related death** were reported in 2007; an unknown number of murders of women and young girls were falsely labeled suicides or accidents.

In Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa, and the United States, **between 40 and 70 percent** of female murder victims were killed by their intimate partners.

In the state of Chihuahua, Mexico, **66 percent** of murders of women were committed by husbands, boyfriends, or other family members.

These statistics are staggering. However, learning the facts and talking about the issue is one way to begin changing the situation.

Key terms

It is helpful to know some of the key terms used when discussing Violence Against Women, an umbrella term that covers a broad range of violent acts or behavior. Those include, but are not limited to murder (femicide), sexual assaults (including rape or other unwanted sexual behavior), rape in the context of conflict (sexual violence that takes place during war), harmful practices (such as female genital mutilation or forced early marriages/child brides), sex trafficking, and sexual harassment.

Domestic Violence (DV) describes a range of violent acts inflicted on people in families. Domestic violence includes violence committed against children, violence couples commit toward each other, abuse of elderly family members, etc. At one time, domestic violence described violence against women by an intimate partner. However, a new term identifies this type of violence.

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) now describes violence committed by an intimate partner. Isolating this single aspect from all other domestic violence situations helps us to understand the pervasiveness of this type of violence in our society.

Understanding these common terms will help as you explore the subject of violence and learn what you can do to advocate for those suffering from it.

The Violence Against Women Act

The federal Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was passed in the United States as a part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. VAWA was an attempt to “end violence against women and remedy the laws and social practices that had fostered and justified the history of violence against women” (<http://tinyurl.com/c8ts9y3>). The act is comprised of nine areas of intervention, including:

- enhancing judicial and law enforcement tools to combat violence against women;
- improving services for victims;

- improving services, protection, and justice for young victims of violence;
- strengthening America’s families by preventing violence;
- strengthening the healthcare system’s response;
- offering housing opportunities and safety for battered women and children;
- providing economic security for victims;
- protecting battered and trafficked immigrants; and
- providing safety for Indian women (<http://tinyurl.com/c8ts9y3>).

The intention of this landmark legislation was to formalize ways to help protect women against abuse. It also was designed help victims become survivors, not fatality statistics.

VAWA signaled a change in society, acknowledging that historically our laws, systems, and culture have allowed violence against women, but will no longer. President Obama signed a bill reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act for another five years on March 7, 2013. The act has been re-authorized twice before, in 2000 and 2005. Reauthorizing is important because it allows for amendments to the original or previous acts, improving legislation that provides lifesaving assistance to hundreds of thousands of women, men, and children who are victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking.

One important amendment to the 2005 reauthorization includes empowering Native American tribal authorities to prosecute non-Native Americans for abuses committed on tribal lands. A loophole in the previously authorized VAWA allowed non-Native American spouses to practically get away with murder on tribal grounds. Additional amendments to the act include protections for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people.

To learn more about these additions, watch the video from *Democracy Now!* noted in the sidebar. According to a White House statement (<http://www>

whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/vawa_factsheet.pdf) on the two decades since VAWA was first created, the act has improved criminal justice response to violence, ensured that victims and their families have access to services, and created positive change for women. More victims are reporting abusers and in the United States, and domestic violence has declined.

We are fortunate to have VAWA in this country and to have agencies such as UN Women that can keep us informed about what's going on globally regarding violence against women. It is important that those of us who are interested in the issue continue to monitor and report progress.

How can you help?

By educating yourself on the issue and talking to others about it, you can help raise awareness about local, regional, or global initiatives that help women who are suffering from violence.

You can also teach the young males in your family to respect all people. Encourage the young females to respect themselves and to avoid people who speak or act abusively toward them. See all people as children of God, deserving a life without suffering at the hands of those who should love them. Talk about these issues. Support with money or volunteer work agencies that help people in abusive situations.

As people of faith, you can find resources to use to support efforts within your church and community. One such resource has been developed by Religions for Peace. This toolkit was designed specifically for collaborative use by religious communities. In the introduction to toolkit, they share these thoughts: "Religious leaders and communities of faith have the moral authority and the responsibility to work together, in a spirit of multi-faith collaboration, to promote and protect the inviolable dignity of women and girls. People of faith have a unique and unparalleled potential, as moral and spiritual leaders, to be powerful agents of prevention, education and advocacy to end violence against women." Developed in 2009, the link to the toolkit is included in the Resources sidebar.

If you or someone you know is involved in an abusive situation, search the Internet for local agencies that are available to help. If you are in danger, devise a safety plan with an advocate that can help you think through ways to escape to safety. If and when the time comes that you need to make a change quickly, having a plan in place and a friend to call will be comforting. 🌸

Nancy J. Goldberger works at Loyola University Chicago where she is also pursuing a Master of Arts in women studies and gender studies. Learning is one of her biggest joys in life, followed closely by sharing what she learns with others. She believes that together we can make the world a better place for all.

Resources

Learn more about the Violence Against Women Act by visiting these websites:

The National Network to End Domestic Violence—<http://nnedv.org/policy/issues/vawa.html>

The American Bar Association—<http://tinyurl.com/c8ts9y3>

The White House—<http://tinyurl.com/l66dzxq>

United Nations Women—<http://tinyurl.com/p2wr7tq>

Learn more about support for abused women:

Religions for Peace Toolkit—http://www.healthpolicyinitiative.com/Publications/Documents/1032_1_RESTORING_DIGNITY_End_Violence_Against_Women_Toolkit_acc.pdf

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence—<http://tinyurl.com/6fqnb8n>

Department of Health and Human Services, child welfare—<http://tinyurl.com/l55frhx>

The Aspire News App—<http://tinyurl.com/nnf4c2b>





FAMILY MATTERS

Bold, Spirited, Courageous

by Sue Gamelin

I have a tattoo. It's a Kanji character, indelibly inked onto my left ankle. Kanji characters, adopted from Mandarin, are used in Japanese writing, and they are beautiful. My dad spent World War II in the Pacific, battling the Japanese. My choice of Kanji seems to me a reconciling gesture.

But my tattoo choice is much, much more than some insignificant attempt at reconciliation with another nation. The character that I chose for my ankle is an announcement that I am "bold, spirited, courageous." To whom am I announcing that? To me.

This story started five years before I got my tattoo. One evening I had turned off the interstate toward my home in Atlanta. It was near midnight, and I was returning from Nashville where my role as an assistant to the bishop had taken me to a congregation there. I breathed a sigh of relief as I exited Interstate 75, the 12-lane highway that is always busy, even at 11:45 p.m. It was a relief to drive 35 miles an hour on a four lane road. Until. Until headlights came toward me, in my lane. Cars were scattering all around me. I had no place to go. Do people really scream when they are in danger? Yes. I screamed but not as loudly as the hideous noise of the crash. Suddenly all was still. I looked at the strange white thing hanging out of my steering wheel. An air bag. And then people were all around, yelling things. Steam was rising from the hood of my car. My left foot hurt. So did my face. My chest, too.

What I knew deep in my heart after I

was released from the hospital emergency department was that my broken foot, my cracked sternum, my airbag-burned face and arms, my seatbelt-bruised chest, and the bone bruises and damaged tendons and ligaments in both legs weren't the worst of my injuries. I was broken emotionally.

In the weeks following the accident, I became the world's most hyper-vigilant driver. I knew The Secret that no one else knew: Drivers can violate the rules of the road and hurt me. Not just the drunk driver who slammed into me, but any other driver on the road. The Secret visited me at night, in nightmare after nightmare. I worked harder and harder at my job, but forgot things, couldn't always process issues, and was easily angered, even about insignificant matters.

I had known times of sadness in my life, but I met a new acquaintance: Depression—with a capital D. A few months after my accident, I witnessed a string of cars crashing together in downtown Atlanta, and I could barely drive home. The heavy cloud Depression had descended again, incapacitating me. Did I tell my husband, my dearest and most trustworthy friend, about my emotional distress? No. Was he confused and troubled? Yes. But it was My Secret, and I hoarded it. I knew that it was too awful to reveal.

On the first anniversary of my accident I set out to find a psychotherapist. Dr. Nelson listened as I talked through my tears. She heard all of my secrets, and helped me understand what was happening. PTSD. Post Traumatic Stress

Disorder. We know those words all too well these days. But 20 years ago, at the time of my accident, they weren't in our vocabulary.

PTSD is in our lexicon now. We've learned about it from returning soldiers who haven't been able to leave behind the after-effects of the trauma they experienced. Soldiers, like my friend Will, who paces anxiously through his home, searching for danger long after his tour in Afghanistan. Many rape victim survivors know PTSD. My friend's night terrors assault her again and again. Survivors of childhood abuse, police brutality, break-ins, hurricanes, or earthquakes may suffer from PTSD. My friend Al bolts when he hears footsteps behind him on the sidewalk. The mugging that left him bloodied and battered continues to call out danger.

PTSD is hard on families. I worked to hide from my family the awful pain inside of me. I couldn't understand or share why I was emotionally broken. The National Institute of Mental Health has a website full of important information about PTSD. Please read it so that you can learn what those affected by it are experiencing. We need that understanding so that we can be present for them and also for ourselves if we number ourselves among them.

I want to tell you about my return to wholeness. I am absolute-

ly, positively convinced that God does not let horrible things to happen to test us. God doesn't "need that baby more than we do." God doesn't relish our wars and diseases, accidents and abuse, mudslides and tornadoes because we can "learn from them." I don't know why God lets them happen. I do know that our world is broken, and that God will birth a new earth, where weeping is no more (Revelation 21:1-4).

Dr. Gary L. Harbaugh's book about recovering from disasters, *Act of God/Active God* (Fortress Press, 2001), says that natural disasters aren't "acts of God," as insurance policies call them. Rather, those disasters are blessed by an active God, who insists on being in the middle of the wounds caused by bones and homes and hearts breaking. Our active God heals us from the inside out. Slowly, I realized this Truth, the One that is filling my life:

God sticks to us in times of trouble more closely than a well-sucked lollipop sticks to a child's hair. Can healing take a long time? Yes. Did I need my family, a new friend who showed up to accompany me, my psychotherapist, and God's Holy Spirit alive and powerful in the Word, in Holy Communion, and in the prayers of the faithful? Yes, yes, yes, and yes. Wholeness now is as real to me as was brokenness.

Five years after my accident, I had the reality of healing inked on my left ankle, one place where the damage from the accident had been all too real. "Bold, spirited, courageous." That's me, thanks be to God, who brings wholeness to the broken and life where there was death. 🌿

The Rev. Sue Gamelin is a retired ELCA pastor in North Carolina. She and her husband, Tim, have four grown children and their spouses and 11 grandchildren.





THE PRACTICE OF FEELING PAIN

by Barbara Brown Taylor

A Geography
of Faith

*An Altar
in the
World*

BARBARA BROWN
TAYLOR

Author of Leaving Church

Pain is provocative. Pain pushes people to the edge, and causes them to ask fundamental questions such as “Why is this happening?” and “How can this be fixed?” Pain brings out the best in people along with the worst. Pain strips away all the illusions required to maintain the status quo. Pain begs for change, and when those in its grip find no release on earth, plenty of them look to heaven—including some whose formal belief systems preclude such wishful thinking.

Pain is not optional for human beings. How can pain serve as a spiritual practice? Like all the other aspects of the human condition—pain can be handled in a variety of ways. We can try to avoid pain. We can deny pain. We can numb it, and we can fight it. Or we

can engage pain when it comes to us, and give it our full attention so that it can teach us what we need to know about the Really Real.

You might notice that the spikes in your pain bear some relationship to the leaps in your growth. When your family moved for the fourth time in five years, you learned to enjoy your own company in the months before you made new friends at school. When your partner left you, you remembered what else you meant to do in your life beyond staying together. When the doctor called about the spot on your lung, you finally made up with your sister. These are not the ways you would have chosen to become more than you were, but they worked.

Bargaining with God

Pain makes theologians of us all. If you have spent even one night in real physical pain, then you know what that can do to your faith in God, not to mention your faith in your own ability to manage your life.

One afternoon when I was pruning trees, I stuck a sharp stick in my right eye. It hurt badly enough that I dropped my pruning shears and staggered to the house to wash the pine bark out of my eye. An hour later, it hurt badly enough for me to ask my husband to drive me to the emergency room, where a physician's assistant put some numbing orange dye in my eye and said it looked all right. An hour after that, when the numbness had worn off, I took a bunch of aspirin and went to bed, hoping to find some relief from the pain in my sleep.

Every time I woke up, the pain in my right eye shot through me like an electrical shock. Every time it did, I cried out loud. I took more aspirin and fell asleep again. I woke up and was shocked again. My right eye felt as if a large chunk of pine bark was in it, so I felt my way downstairs and lay down in the bathtub, letting warm water run from the faucet straight into my eye. The pain became worse, not better.

While the grandfather clock tolled hour after hour, I prayed the kind of prayers I never thought I would pray. I began the kind of bargaining with God that I do not believe in, and when that did not work, I called God's honor into question. I begged God to help. I dared God to help. Finally, near dawn, I found myself turning away from the God in charge of pain removal toward the God who had stayed with me through the pain no matter what I said. By the time I saw an optometrist who told me I had a torn cornea, my mid-night wrestling match was over. The pain had not only changed the way I prayed, it had also changed my ideas about the One to whom I prayed.

Meeting the Holy

Pain is one of the fastest routes to a no-frills encounter

with the Holy, and yet the majority of us do everything in our power to avoid it. We spend a great deal of money on painkillers. We drown our sorrows in alcohol. We ask for nitrous oxide at the dentist's office. The small circle of those who choose pain both fascinate and appall us: people as different from one another as the women who bear children without anesthesia, the teenagers who cut themselves, and the religious enthusiasts who whip themselves. However, the only pain I know well is the garden variety, which easily fills all the baskets I have.

When I was in high school I feared needles so much that I decided I would never marry as long as a blood test was required. As best I can recall, this fear originated in a vaccination I received when I was 4 years old. By then I was big enough to fight the county nurse, who cursed audibly when I jerked away as she plunged the needle into my right buttock. The needle broke off, which left her holding a spewing syringe as I fell to the floor and rolled under the examining table. The needle was removed with a pair of pliers. The wound was swabbed with alcohol that smelled like liquid pain to me. I was pinned down for the second try at my vaccination, which was over before I had time to yell. I left the doctor's office a defeated but immunized child.

The trauma was such that I later refused Novocain when I went to the dentist's office as a teenager. I feared the needle worse than I feared the drill, and no amount of reasoning on my dentist's part could change my mind. The pain was exquisite but bearable. It was like being stung by a wasp with a long stinger for a long time, while someone tapped on my jaw with a ball-peen hammer. The pain was focusing. My mind did not wander. Plus, when it was over, it was over. My dentist looked worse than I did as I rose from the chair and thanked him for his work.

When it came time to have my wisdom teeth out, I caved in. I watched the orthodontist slide a tiny butterfly needle into a vein on the back of my hand; I started

counting backward from 10; and the next memory I had was of coming to consciousness with a mouth full of cotton wadding that smelled like iron. After that, I became a great fan of anesthesia. I asked for it every time.

Sitting with Pain

Later, I learned that it is often harder to sit with someone in pain than it is to feel pain yourself. In the 1980s I sat with a lot of people dying of AIDS. It was a killer then. It also scared those who did not have it, so that people who were sick with AIDS were often lonely as well. When I went to see someone in the hospital, I had to stop at a cart by the door to his room and put on a gown, a surgical mask, and rubber gloves. I knew that this was for his protection, not mine, but it did not feel that way. It felt like I was insulating myself from him, making sure that his flesh never touched my flesh, when that was exactly what both of us needed.

I learned at least two lessons about pain during all those years. One was that after a while there is no reason to talk about it. When pain is as ubiquitous as air, why comment on it? Better to go where the pain leads, down to the ground floor where all the real is: real love, real sorrow, real thanks, real fear.

The second lesson I learned is that there is a difference between pain and suffering, which I have used as synonymous until now. Pain, according to the American Medical Association, is “an unpleasant sensation related to tissue damage.” That language is a little too restrained for the situations I have in mind, but it is scientifically correct. Pain originates in the body. Pain happens in the flesh.

Suffering, on the other hand, happens in the mind. The mind decides what pain means and whether it is deserved. The mind notices who comes to visit and who does not. The mind remembers how good life used to be and is not likely to be again. The mind makes judgments, measures loss, takes blame, and assigns guilt. In the case of my friends with AIDS, their

suffering included parents who would not acknowledge their lovers, landlords who would not renew their leases, employers who would not hold their jobs, and insurance companies that would not care for their survivors. While there is no doubt it was AIDS that finally killed them, I think their suffering was often worse than their pain.

Here, then, is another feature of pain, including the pain of suffering. At its worst, it can erase most of what you thought you knew about yourself. People who live with chronic pain usually know more about this than those who may reasonably look forward to feeling better soon. To live with pain on a daily basis is to be involved in a high-maintenance relationship. To make peace with the pain can require as much energy as fighting it. Routines you once did without thinking—rising, dressing, eating, walking—now take concerted effort, if not paid help. Who is this person who cannot do such simple tasks? Who is this person who cannot help anyone, not even herself?

Staying Awake

One night of real pain is enough to strip away your illusions about how strong you are, how brave, how patient and faithful. Who would have thought that a torn cornea could hurt all the way down to the heels of your feet? Who would have imagined that a bad case of food poisoning could make you doubt the mercy of God?

Pain remains a reliable altar in the world, a place to discover that a life can be as full of meaning as it is of hurt. The two have never canceled each other out and I doubt they ever will, at least not until each of us—or all of us together—find the way through. 🌸

Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *An Altar in the World*, was a *New York Times* bestseller. Her first memoir, *Leaving Church*, received an Author of the Year award from the Georgia Writers Association. Taylor spent 15 years in parish ministry before becoming the Butman Professor of Religion at Piedmont College, Demorest, Ga. She lives on a working farm in rural north Georgia with her husband, Ed.



LET US PRAY

Hospitality as Prayer

by Julie K. Aageson

In these reflections on prayer as a way of looking at the world, we focus this month on the letter h: hospitality as prayer. In a classic book about experiencing the sacred in daily life (*Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, Scribner, 1996), authors Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat define hospitality as a practice, a way of welcoming guests and alien ideas with graciousness. How might gracious welcome—both of people and ideas—become prayer, a way of experiencing God’s presence and a way of welcoming Christ?

For almost as long as I can remember, creating warm and welcoming spaces for gathering has been a basic instinct, a passion. As children, we cobbled together beach houses in the sand using driftwood to mark the rooms where we would welcome siblings and cousins. We opened “the doors” to meeting places and eating places.

Later, my desire to share hospitality came in the form of dorm rooms, first apartments, spaces for afternoon tea, and university flats where simple dinners were occasions for sharing good food and stimulating conversation—all of them sheltering spaces, safe, protected, sacred.

Hospitality begins with an eagerness to embrace others. It’s about sharing who we are and what we have. In a world where strangers often are feared and where all of us are guilty of shunning “the other,” hospitality requires risk. It asks us to trust, to open ourselves, to show generosity and genuine interest in others. Sister Joan Chittister describes it

as the way we come *out of ourselves*. Perhaps that is one of the ways hospitality becomes prayer.

On occasion, our places of hospitality become forts meant to keep others out. Rather than opening doors and minds, we try to protect ourselves by building fences and shoring up our prejudices. We lock the doors out of fear. It’s so much easier for us to show hospitality to those with whom we agree.

When we were very young, my mother told us that a woman we did not know but who occasionally brought fruit to our door might be an angel. Of course, we were transfixed by the thought. It was my mother’s version of welcoming strangers, showing hospitality, entertaining angels.

Hospitality as prayer makes space for honesty and intimacy. One feels its embrace because it is interested in others; it welcomes new ideas; it shows generosity. In those spaces of hospitality, God is present and God’s grace is tangible. There is largesse of spirit!

May hospitality be part of our prayer. It is the way we come out of ourselves, open our doors, welcome strangers, and see Christ in one another. O God, make us willing to share the wonder and the frustration of being human. Make each of our corners of the world, of the universe, sheltering places where friends and family—even strangers and perhaps “enemies”—can find rest and peace, grace and acceptance. 🌸

Julie K. Aageson retired from ELCA Resource Center leadership and now she and her spouse write and travel.



EARTH WISE

Peaches and Pits

by Terry L. Bowes

It is the beginning of gardening season when all good things are possible. The vegetable garden right now is the picture of unblemished promise. The soil has been tilled and raked smooth. The hoe is leaning against the fence, waiting for Steve to cut the first row of the garden. The peas are soaking between layers of wet paper towels. Snow is in the forecast, ideal for those “cold weather” crops like peas, lettuce, spinach, and kale.

At the same time, I am starting tomato, pepper, and gourd seeds in the sunroom. I know that in a few months nurturing the garden will feel like a chore; but today, I am full of energy and optimism.

I am not alone in my spring-time anticipation. Small growers like me share the same hopefulness and concerns as farmers whose livelihoods depend on the vagaries of the growing season. Will it rain enough or too much? Will it be warm enough or too hot?

When the television meteorologists suggest that I cover my tender plants, I can do that. I can even bring my potted herbs and tomato plants into the house. I can be confident that if my entire garden is demolished, my family will still eat. Large grain farmers have no such options. They have invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in their crop. They have spent countless hours in their fields.

The risk always exists that the entire crop can be wiped out in one 10-minute hail storm. Those families will struggle for an entire year to put food on the table.

Fruit growers can lose a year of their

livelihood because of an unusually early or late freeze.

Palisade, Colo., is a small community on the western slope of the Rockies. Nestled against the Book Cliffs of the Grand Mesa, Palisade is uniquely situated to grow amazing peaches, pears, and other fruit.

Each August, the town of Lafayette, Colo., near Denver holds its Peach Festival. Peach growers from Palisade bring their golden fruit the 230 miles across the Rockies to participate. Local bakeries sell peach pies and cobblers. Live entertainment keeps the streets hopping and makes the festival one of the most anticipated events of the year.

In 2013, a freeze in Palisade on Mothers' Day, took a huge bite out of that year's peach crop, resulting in a yield of less than 50 percent of the usual harvest. All of the orchard owners suffered. Then they all worked together to scrape together the 30,000 pounds of peaches that the festival requires. No one competed to see who had suffered the most. No one counted how many boxes of peaches they contributed to the cause of recovery. Everyone simply plugged along together. They understood that they could not control the weather; and they trusted one another to work together as a team. The proof of their success easily could be seen in the peach juice dripping from the chins of children and adults alike in Lafayette.

When suffering is shared in community, mutual compassion helps to make pain bearable. Endurance is strengthened

when encouraged in community. In both cases, character is developed and revealed, often taking everyone by surprise.

Suffering, endurance, and character are woven together in a tight braid. It is impossible to tease the cords apart. Shimmering throughout that braid is the precious gold thread of hope.

No one has escaped the experience of pain and suffering of some kind. We cannot always understand the health or financial challenges we may face. We lose loved ones. We bury our children without ever comprehending why.

How can we trust when our understanding is clouded with pain and fear? Sometimes it helps to have a trinket to hold in our hands to remind our hearts to have faith.

I treasure the "comfort cross" created by my cousin George, who is a Roman Catholic priest. Father George and a nun who is his friend work through a 21-step process to create the comfort crosses, including a blessing for each one. The cross fits perfectly in the palm of my hand. It gives me a focus for my meditations and prayers. With every prayer, the cross is worn smoother and smoother.

Years ago, I began giving my grandchildren tiny tokens of hope and faith that they could carry in their pockets on tough days. I visit my local arts and crafts stores and stock up on teddy bears smaller than my thumb or ceramic hearts intended for scrapbooking.

I gave one of those pink hearts to Stephanie during a difficult time in her third-grade life. A few days later, she

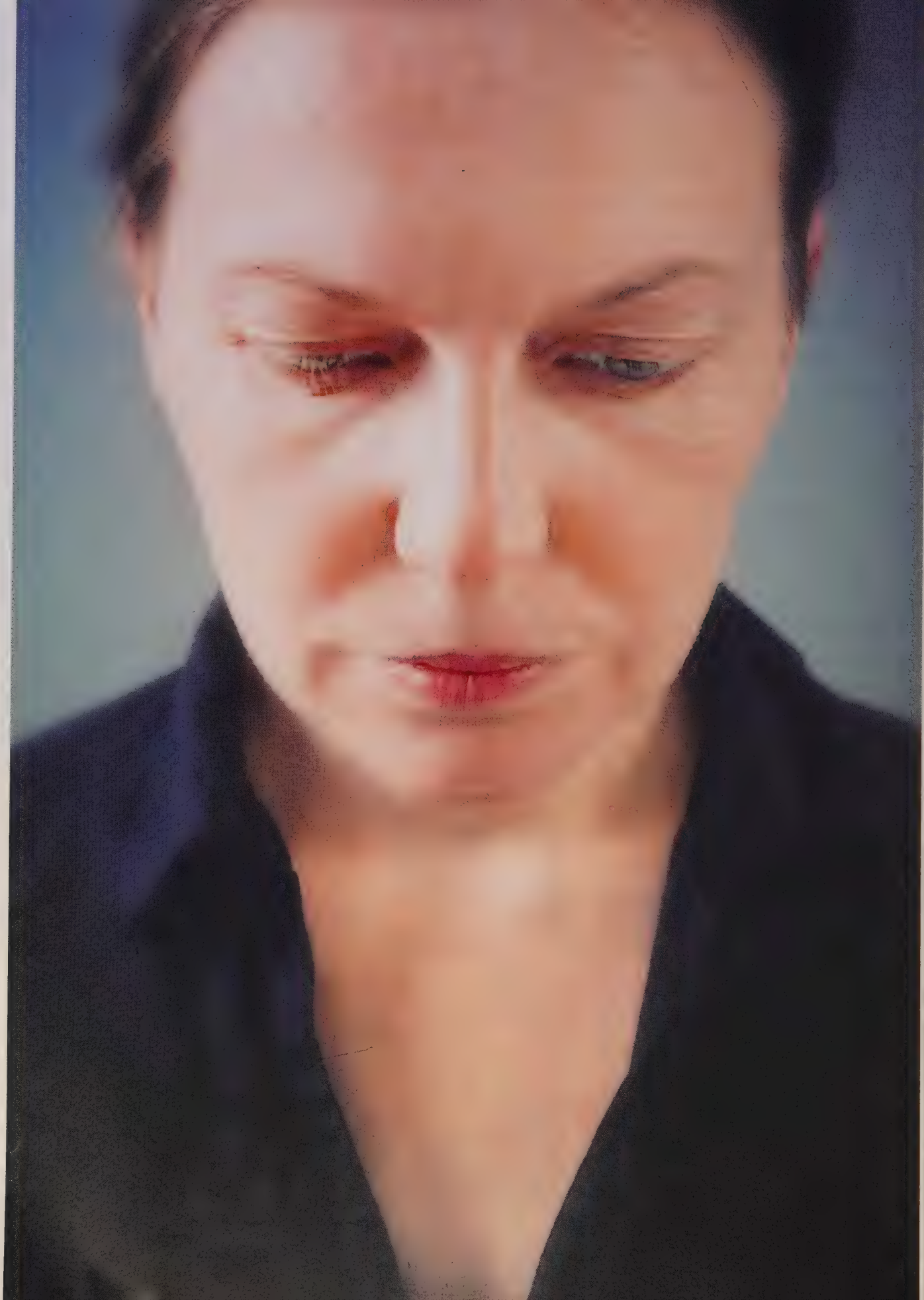
called me to cry that the heart had fallen out of her pocket at recess. She had searched the playground to no avail. I comforted her by saying, "Obviously, someone else needed that heart more than you do now."

As a gardener, I frequently find empty seed packets in the pockets of my jeans, a reminder of the faith and hope with which I had planted those beans and spaghetti squash.

Now, perhaps, I will carry a peach pit in my pocket as a reminder that out of suffering can grow endurance and hope. And I will appreciate the peach juice dripping from my chin. 🍑

Terry L. Bowes gardens, grandmothers, and gathers near Longmont, Colo.





Living with Dying

by Deanna A. Thompson

WHEN I WAS DIAGNOSED WITH STAGE IV CANCER at age 42, I started preparing to die. Granted, we should all “live like we’re dying” as singer Kris Allen reminds us, but an aggressive diagnosis ups the urgency on doing just that. I went back to teaching even though I could barely stand because I wanted to be in the classroom one last time. I stopped buying new clothes because I didn’t think I’d have much time to wear them. I insisted on a summer vacation even though I had little surplus energy because I thought that would be the last one I’d take with the family. My husband and I secured burial plots. There didn’t seem to be much time, and I was intentional in my preparations for the end.

Then I went into remission. Having already resigned from my life, I gradually let myself believe that there could be another semester in the classroom, that if I bought new clothes I’d have some time to wear them, that I might get to experience another family vacation. What an amazing turn of events. It seemed that I had experienced a death and a resurrection. Thank God, thank the doctors for allowing me more time.

Living with gratitude has been at the top of the life agenda these past five years of finding remission, losing it, finding it, losing it, then finding it again. The days, months, and years have been accompanied by unfathomable gifts of grace. At the same time, the space occupied by a stage IV cancer diagnosis, the fickle status of remission, and ongoing oncology visits and chemo treat-

ments is often a discomfoting one. In a recent *The New York Times* op-ed piece, Paul Kalanithi, a young resident neurological surgeon recently diagnosed with metastatic lung cancer, tries to figure out how to live in that space. “The path forward would seem obvious,” he writes, “if only I knew how many months or years I had left.”

Even though all of us not on our deathbeds don’t know the hour of our death, we all know we will die. As Kalanithi points out, however, those of us with metastatic cancer know this acutely. In his own grappling with how to live in the midst of a devastating diagnosis, this budding surgeon found wisdom in writer Samuel Beckett’s claim, “I can’t go on. I’ll go on,” statements that capture the competition between resignation and determination, between despair over receiving a premature death sentence and evidence that death is most likely not tomorrow.

Between death and resurrection

Recently theologians have become engaged with trauma studies and questions of how Christian thought and practice address “the suffering that remains” (Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*). Certainly the centrality of the cross in the Christian narrative beckons followers of Christ to take suffering and death seriously. The immediate coupling of death with resurrection, however, is a place where theologians engaging trauma theory pause and take stock. For too many who live in the aftermath of traumatic

events, a tidy, linear cross-to-resurrection narrative simply doesn't map the reality of lives undone.

If communities of faith are to help make it possible to "live like we're dying" for those haunted by the lingering effects of traumatic events, attention must be given to the space that exists between death and resurrection. That space where healing and redemption might be experienced, but perhaps only dimly, where people go on even as they sense they can't. In my own case, every day in remission is most definitely better than any day without remission. And yet suffering remains. What does it mean to live like we're dying when trauma remains a heartbeat away?

Martin Luther's image of Christian community, the "priesthood of all believers" offers some insight on how the church can be with those living with the persistent effects of trauma. One poignant way Luther described the vocation of the "priesthood of all" came in response to 16th-century Germans being taken ill by the plague. Lifting up the model of ministry set forth in Matthew 25, Luther insisted that we are all "bound to each other that no one may forsake the other in distress" ("A Sermon on Preparing to Die," *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*).

Knowing the temptation of the healthy to keep their distance from the sick, Luther admonished all "the priests" to understand such temptations as "the devil's doing." In the midst of a pandemic that took one-third of Europe's population, Luther's admonition is quite remarkable. While Christians might rush to the side of "Christ or their mother" should they need care, Luther hammered the command of Matthew 25, proclaiming that care for the sickest is care for Christ.

Being present as Christ

In our day, Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas echoes Luther's call to be with those who suffer, insisting that when the church lives out—or literally, *embodies*—its call to be the body of Christ in the world, it is present

with those who suffer, cutting through the suffering and isolation that remain. But Hauerwas, in "Salvation and Health: Why Medicine Needs the Church" (*From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics*) observes with frankness how the temptation to flee remains ever present:

[I]t is no easy matter to be with the ill, especially when we cannot do much for them other than simply be present. Our very helplessness too often turns to hate, both toward the one in pain and ourselves, as we despise them for reminding us of our helplessness. Only when we remember that our presence is our doing . . . can we be saved from our fevered and hopeless attempt to control others' and our own existence. Our willingness to be ill and ask for help as well as our willingness to be present with the ill is no special or extraordinary activity, but a form of the Christian obligation to be present to one another in and out of pain.

Members of the body of Christ are called to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world, attending with special care to those who suffer from the ongoing effects of trauma, being present with and for them in the midst of the days of plague or cancer or death. That's a difficult calling to embrace. But to "live like we're dying" with others who are closer to that dying than we are is where God calls us to be.

Living with stage IV cancer, I'm certainly closer to death than those who don't live with a serious diagnosis. At the same time, I seem to be living mostly in a future where stage IV cancer diagnoses won't be a death sentence but rather the beginning of living (hopefully for many years) with a chronic condition. How awesome. Yet I hear from the experts that few others with "my kind" of stage IV cancer are doing as well as I'm doing. How lousy.

Being an anomaly makes that discomfiting middle space a bit more uncomfortable. But I go on, trying to

mean as fully as possible in to that space, embracing with gratitude the body of Christ occupying that space with me, praying that more who share my diagnosis will soon share the space with me, and hoping that I have more days, months, and years, to live in the aftermath of death, to glimpse healing and resurrection, and to understand how to respond to “I can’t go on” with “This is the day the Lord has made” and “I’ll go on.”

Hoping for more

As many of us know so well, even as we pray and hope for more in this life, those prayers and hopes are not always realized. It is vital, then, that in our communities we talk not just about hoping for more in this life, but also for more in the life to come testified to in Scripture.

When I think about how cancer has changed the way I think and talk about hope, I have become aware of how contemporary theologians like myself have a lot to say about the present and seemingly little to say about the future—that is, about life after death.

When talk of heaven results in devaluing life on earth, there’s a problem. Christian faith is an expectant faith, but not an other-worldly one. We believe God in Jesus Christ became intimately involved in this-worldly realities. Therefore, it’s appropriate that our hope be grounded in life in this world.

I get the desire to focus on the present. As a cancer patient who’s also a theologian, I see a need for *more* theological work on how to talk about “living like we’re dying” in the here and now. Indeed, the gospel’s main attraction—Jesus—spent most of his time not just talking about God’s future but in siding with the outcasts and healing the sick. We need to talk more about how contemporary incarnations of the body of Christ side with those with cancer and participate in the possibilities of healing in the here and now.

At the same time, I wonder whether those of us who talk about God for a living do a disservice to the

God of the Bible and to those who suffer when we limit our discussion to the present. After all, the Bible is full of promises of life with God not only in the here and now but also in life beyond the grave.

For all of us who struggle to trust in these promises—even in the midst of death-dealing conditions—hearing that there’s more than just this terminal diagnosis or that life-shattering earthquake offers a word of hope. That the suffering and trauma of this world doesn’t have the final word is an essential part of the gospel’s good news.

In the scientific postmodern age in which we live, many of us emphasize the limits of knowing what lies beyond this life.

While Christian faith talks of heavenly feasts and bodily resurrection, we wonder how to set these claims alongside the science of decomposing flesh or suspicions regarding the possibility of continued consciousness beyond death.

Even as I admit ignorance on the details, I take heart in the fact that the biblical images of life with God are consistently and inescapably communal. In Romans, Paul asserts that in hope *we* have been saved; he also insists that nothing can separate *us* from the love of God in Christ Jesus. At the heart of the vision of life beyond this one is the affirmation of continued connection, of life in community.

As I attempt to “live like I’m dying” in the midst of a serious diagnosis, the body of Christ that surrounds me helps me hope that today’s sustaining connections with family, friends, and the church are glimpses of God’s promised life to come. In the midst of uncertainty, we go on, even when we’re not sure we can, hoping for more in this world and the next. 🌿

Deanna A. Thompson, Ph.D., is professor of religion at Hamline University, St. Paul, Minn., where she also teaches classes in African American studies, women studies, and social justice. She has written a book about her cancer: *Hoping for More: Having Cancer, Talking Faith, and Accepting Grace*, and she speaks and writes about living with cancer.

Comforting AND Consoling

by Kathie Bender Schwich

In worship on Sunday during the Prayers of the Church, the congregation to which I belong prayed for “comfort and relief for those who are suffering.” I’m not sure what exactly the assisting minister had in mind when he wrote those words, but as I heard them my mind immediately went to those both near and far about whose suffering I was painfully aware.

Within the confines of the church’s sanctuary itself, I thought about the family several pews behind me whose husband and father is currently in prison; the woman sitting next to me who shed tears during the Hymn of the Day, finding the words particularly painful as she mourns the death of her parent; and the couple across the aisle who, nearly a decade later, still grieve the death of their young child. Then I thought about my colleagues: one who was recently diagnosed with an aggressive type of cancer and is currently dealing with the physical and emotional pain of chemotherapy, and another whose husband was just informed that his job was being eliminated and who is worried about how they’ll pay the mortgage.



Suffering wasn’t confined to Job or people of Job’s day. It is all around us. So how are we, people of the Resurrection, people who are convinced that “nothing in all creation can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:38–39) supposed to bring comfort and relief to those who suffer?

Author Erin Linn in *I Know Just How You Feel: Avoiding the Cliches of Grief* writes, “Throughout our lives, most of us spend time being comforted or being the comforter, being consoled or being the consoler.”

Both roles are painfully difficult and, at times, can be overwhelming It is human nature to want to reach out and help those who are in pain. We must draw from the goodness that is in each of us as a place to begin.”

Good Intentions

I think it is safe to assume that whenever we reach out to help another in pain our intentions are good. However good intentions don’t always lead to words of comfort or relief being expressed. Often, in our desire to make the person feel better, or even to “fix” the situation, we say things that are less than helpful . . . and maybe even hurtful . . . to the person who is suffering.

A young mother who experienced the tragic and unexpected death of her infant child recently posted anonymously on a counselor’s blog, “Please stop attempting to spiritualize the death of my child. Assigning some thoughtless Christian platitude only serves to deepen my anger and further question my beliefs. If you don’t know what to say, a simple, ‘I’m sorry, I don’t know what to say,’ would be far better than the actual attempts to comfort that I’ve received” (<http://tinyurl.com/lyja2hs>).

The author then goes on to recount some of the words of “comfort” that were spoken to her during her excruciating grief, and her reaction to them. Several times she heard, “God has a plan.” In her pain she wondered what loving God would have a plan that included the death of a small child (or the diagnosis of a terminal disease, or the loss of a good job, or the end of a loving marriage, or . . . fill in the blank!).

Another message that this woman heard frequently was, “I know just how you feel.” In our attempt to relate to what the sufferer is going through, we try to identify with their pain and let them know that they are not alone in their suffering. However, rather than conveying empathy and a sense of walking with the other, saying, “I know just how you feel” often is offensive to the hearer. People react differently to the same situa-

tions. What might be a minor bump in the road of life for one person could be a significant crisis to another. We will never know exactly how the other feels when in a situation that brings suffering.

When we want to comfort one who is suffering—be it from the loss of a loved one, the loss of physical health, or other types of loss or crisis—we often feel helpless about what to do. We want to do something and make ourselves available so we say, “If you need anything let me know. I’m here to help.” These words, while sounding helpful and giving on the surface, are really anything but helpful. Instead what they do is place the responsibility back on the sufferer for knowing what they need and when they should be imposing on us to ask for it. What we are doing is asking the sufferer to do the extra work of reaching out to us to ask for help. Rather than helping, we are giving them an extra burden to deal with.

Helpful Words and Actions

What can we do instead to be helpful to one who is suffering? First, we can be present and listen. At a time when others turn away out of fear of not knowing what to say or do, our presence can let the sufferer know that he or she is not alone. We care and we are there. And we can listen. Often people who are suffering find comfort in talking about the situation: reminiscing about the one who has died, talking about their fears related to their illness, or sharing the pain of the broken relationship.

Rather than trying to jump in with words that we believe will help and to provide a quick fix, we can listen with our compassionate hearts and ears and in doing so bring comfort to the one who is hurting. The compassionate listener may also be called upon to listen to words of anger against loved ones or even against God.

Rushing in to defend the object of the anger isn’t helpful at times like these. Remember we aren’t there to fix the situation. We are there to listen. We don’t need to defend God to another who is in the throes of

despair. Such a defense can come across as meaningless at best and very hurtful at worst.

Listening can also mean sitting in silence. It will be tempting to try to fill the void with empty chatter, but avoiding that temptation will give the other permission to speak when they wish, to shed the tears as they come, and the knowledge that one who cares is comfortable with their silence and their pain.

Using Scripture with one who is suffering can also be helpful or hurtful. One woman who was grieving talked about being “bludgeoned” by Romans 8:28 (“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God . . .”) when a well-meaning friend read it to her. To her it meant that if she had loved God more, the tragedy wouldn’t have happened. It is more helpful to share words from some of the Psalms of lament at times like these. Through the words, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Psalm 22:1 offers no easy answers, but rather meets the sufferer where he or she is.

Instead of offering the standard, “Let me know if you need anything,” we can assess the situation and provide for an actual need. When a friend’s spouse died recently, neighbors took it upon themselves to coordinate meals for the family so that she and her children were assured of a worry-free dinner every evening for a month. Are there animals in the house that need to be cared for or errands that need to be run? When these tasks are taken care of, the one who is suffering can focus on more important tasks or details.

While the one who is suffering may not be able to think clearly and make significant decisions, we can show respect for them by offering simple choices. I recall when a mother of two small children had to deal with parenting one child at home while the other was critically ill and in the hospital for an extended period of time. As her friend, I told her one particular day that I would either spend time with the healthy child so that she could be at the other’s bedside or spend time at

the bedside so that she could enjoy some quality time with her other child. As time went on, she was able to ask me to do one or the other to bring some sense of normalcy to her and her children’s lives.

Extending the Comfort

At a time of death or loss, those who are suffering are usually surrounded by friends and loved ones who gather to offer care and support. It is important to remember that once the funeral is over or the imminent crisis has passed and the loved ones have dispersed back to the routines of their lives, the comfort and compassion that we can offer still is appreciated.

Holidays and anniversaries can be especially painful. At times like these it can be helpful to make a phone call or send a card with your thoughts and prayers. If a death has occurred, naming the deceased by name in your card can be especially comforting to those who grieve. We might think that doing so would make the pain of the griever worse, when in fact people find comfort in having their loved one’s name actually spoken. It lets them know that others miss him or her as well. Recognize those especially painful times and provide comfort through your presence and your listening once again.

Providing comfort and relief to one who is suffering is not always easy. But motivated by God’s love for us in Jesus and our love and care for the other, we truly can be about Christ’s work as we offer a compassionate, listening presence to those who are hurting. 🌸

ELCA Pastor Kathie Bender Schwich serves as senior vice president of mission and spiritual care for Advocate Health Care in Illinois, a social ministry organization of the ELCA. Previously she has served as a parish pastor, an assistant to the bishop of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod, and executive assistant to the presiding bishop and executive for synodical relations for the ELCA. She holds a Master of Divinity degree from Luther-Northwestern Theological Seminary and is married to Pastor Daniel Schwich. They are the parents of three sons.

DIAPERING DETROIT



by Heidi Hagstrom

In July, thousands of ELCA youth and adults will descend on Detroit for the 2015 ELCA Youth Gathering. Key messages from Mark's gospel are designed to inspire them to "Rise Up Together" and return to their home communities to "build bridges, bear burdens, break chains, and bring hope," the mission statement of the gathering's host synod, Southeastern Michigan.

The ELCA's approach to the site of each triennial youth gathering can be likened to walking a labyrinth, which often takes you places you don't expect. That is certainly true for our journey alongside the people of Detroit. While the media leads us down a discouraging path through the stories it tells of Detroit, those of us planning the event have witnessed stories of Detroit residents who are fearlessly and enthusiastically reinvesting in the city's rising. For example, Detroit's new mayor is making sure the lights get turned back on and neighborhoods are reclaimed and rebuilt.

And Marybeth Levine wants to supply enough diapers for everyone who needs them.

Marybeth, a.k.a. the "Diaper Lady" recognized a need and created a solution in 2009 by starting the Detroit Area Diaper Bank (DADB). She was motivated by stories of low-income families stealing or reusing diapers. She also heard stories of desperate moms and dads sending their toddlers to preschool wearing plastic grocery bags when their supply of diapers ran out.

Marybeth learned early that parents who rely on federal assistance programs like WIC (Women, Infants, and Children), food stamps, or Medicare, can't get diapers through those programs.

The implications of not having an adequate supply of diapers are far reaching:

Parents cannot leave children at daycare without disposable diapers. So if a parent can't afford diapers, he or she can't go to work or school, and the vicious cycle of poverty continues.

A baby crying uncontrollably from being in the same diaper for too long is at greater risk for child abuse, particularly in an already stressed household.

Seniors who can't afford incontinence supplies

ELCA Youth Gathering participants will collect diapers as a part of their in-kind gifts when they meet in Detroit, July 15–19. The youth are asking Women of the ELCA to partner with them in the diaper collection.



often lose their independence and become homebound, creating pressure on other social services like Meals on Wheels.

Some children with disabilities never outgrow the need for diapers and many will need them to go to school and job training.

Diapers are expensive

A healthy change of diapers can cost up to \$100/month—for all ages. A family in Michigan must be more than 44 percent below the poverty line to receive any kind of cash assistance. Then, a family of three only receives \$492 a month. More facts can be found on the DADB's website (<http://tinyurl.com/ktosr2o>), which Marybeth maintains even though her husband's company relocated her family to Mexico City.

Because of her family's move, Marybeth had to close the diaper bank. Not wanting to leave families stranded, she de-centralized the bank's work by asking her nonprofit partners to continue highlighting the need and capitalizing on the momentum the DADB had created. Marybeth provided them with information and tools to take ownership of the diaper issue alongside the work they already did to get people on their feet and independent.

One of the agencies that accepted responsibility for the diaper crisis is Starfish Family Services in Inkster, Mich., a suburb of Detroit. Starfish has agreed to store and distribute the diapers to Detroit as in-kind gift offerings by youth gathering attendees.

In-kind offerings

ELCA Youth Gathering participants have historically left an in-kind donation in each of the host cities. Staff and planning teams consult with Lutheran Social Service, clergy, and other non-profit agencies and organizations to determine the most pressing needs in the community. Past offerings have included children's books, gift cards, and non-perishable food items.

When the youth gathering planning team charged with identifying the 2015 in-kind offering began its research in Detroit, diapers consistently emerged as a need. Non-profits that work with families and individuals living in poverty list diapers as a top concern.

Rose Coletti, Starfish's own diaper lady, said that some of her clients try to potty train their children too young to avoid needing or wasting diapers. Pediatric urologists believe that toilet training a child when s/he isn't developmentally ready can cause physical problems like frequent urinary tract infections and constipation.



tion. It also can have negative psychological and social implications for children, especially in preschool.

In the beginning, the team felt uncomfortable recommending disposable diapers for the in-kind offering because of the environmental impact. Disposable diapers didn't square with the gathering's value of environmental sustainability. The team studied cloth diapers as an alternative and through its study learned about the realities of people living in poverty. Most families on public assistance, those with the greatest need, don't have a washer and dryer, and their assistance doesn't cover laundry soap. Some of the families in Detroit are struggling to pay their water bills as well.

When interviewing staff from Starfish Family Services in October for this article, they had just distributed 4,000 diapers in two days. Rose said, "You don't know how it brightens our family's faces when visitors bring diapers and wipes."

Ultimately, the gathering planning team recommended disposable diapers, acknowledging that the need trumped the environmental impact in this instance. They also pledged to create study materials that would help youth address the systemic issues of poverty making the need so great.

You are invited

Women of the ELCA groups are invited to join ELCA youth in collecting diapers for their in-kind gifts to Detroit. Connect with young people in your congregation who are going to the 2015 ELCA Youth Gathering to find out how you can help. Perhaps a gift of money would be easiest for the youth to carry. If so, they could buy diapers in Detroit and help its economy.

If your congregation is not sending youth to the gathering, you might connect with a gathering synod coordinator (www.elca.org/gathering) to find a congregation near you that is. At the request of youth in your congregation, you can send a check made out to Women of the ELCA with "Youth Gathering-diapers" in the memo line to ELCA Gift Processing Center, P.O. Box 1809, Merrifield, VA 22116-8009. You also can ship the diapers directly to Immanuel Lutheran Church, 13031 Chandler Park Drive, Detroit, Mich., 48213.

Collecting, sorting, and delivering diapers are among the service projects young people attending the 2015 ELCA Youth Gathering will participate in. Diapers will be collected at the 150-plus hotels where youth groups will stay. On their service day, young people will load the diapers into trailers that will be hauled by local volunteers to the Starfish Family Services building. ELCA youth will unload the diapers into the Starfish facility, take inventory, and organize them by size. The greatest need is for children's sizes 3 and 4, but all sizes will be appreciated, including incontinence supplies for adults. Wipes are also needed.

Starfish will store and distribute the diapers. The Youth Gathering staff are grateful to the Women of the ELCA for supporting youth as they strive to leave a legacy of service and generosity in Jesus' name in Detroit this summer. 🌸

Heidi Hagstrom is director for the ELCA Youth Gathering.



SUFFERING AND ENDURANCE

TRANSFORMING LIFE AND FAITH by Carol Schersten LaHurd

Theme verse

"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." Romans 5:1–5

Overview

The story of Job, with its speeches by Job, Job's friends, and God, will acquaint us with several biblical views of human suffering in relation to God. Paul's letter to the Romans will help us understand a particularly Christian perspective on how suffering can lead to endurance and hope.

Opening hymn

"What Wondrous Love Is This" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 666), "Lord of All Hopefulness" (*ELW* 765), or "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" (*ELW* 587, 588)

To live is to suffer

This month's topic may be the most complicated and difficult of this nine-session Bible study. Our culture

has as many clichés for talking about suffering as there are ways to suffer. When we lose a close family member, some people console us by saying: "She's in heaven now." When a soldier returns from Afghanistan with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), some officers may advise him to "buck up and be strong." (See "Bold, Spirited, Courageous," p. 14.) When a person receives the diagnosis of multiple sclerosis, a friend might respond, "God will send you a cure." When thousands die in such natural disasters as tornadoes and earthquakes, some religious leaders proclaim that their sinful society is being punished by God.

Only when we experience suffering ourselves do we begin to understand. We all will suffer, and, through those experiences, we begin to comprehend more deeply how suffering can alter our faith and practice. German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who was afflicted by severe headaches, is said to have written that "To live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering." Even though Nietzsche was an avowed atheist, these words can stimulate discussion by believers. We can agree that all human life involves suffering; but, as Christians, we have some particular ways to find meaning—and ultimately hope—in the midst of our suffering. (See "The Practice of Feeling Pain," p. 16.)

In 2008, in her early 40s, Hamline University professor Deanna Thompson was living what she called her "95 percent ideal life." She loved her husband and her two young daughters and her work teaching religion to

undergraduates. Then a series of injuries and medical issues led to the diagnosis of stage IV breast cancer. She writes: "My life as a cancer patient bore no resemblance to my 95 percent ideal life. In fact, I scarcely recognized it as my life" (*Hoping for More: Having Cancer, Talking Faith, and Accepting Grace*). Now, five years later, as this Bible study is being written, Thompson's cancer is in remission. But she has not stopped her treatments, or dealing with cancer's impact on her family, or thinking about how it has affected her faith and the theology she teaches. (See "Living with Dying," p. 22.)

Earlier sessions of this Bible study have reminded us that Jesus and Paul also experienced suffering. The passion narrative of Jesus' suffering and death makes up a significant portion of each of the four gospels. Shortly after the crucifixion and resurrection, Peter preached, "In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer" (Acts 3:18). Later, the risen Christ said to Ananias about the Saul/Paul he was about to meet in Damascus: "I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:16). We will visit both Jesus' and Paul's suffering, but we will begin this session with the Old Testament's foremost example of suffering, Job.

Job: The Bible's model of suffering

What is the first word you think of when you hear the name Job? Over the years, most of my students have answered, "suffering." Job's story offers insights into several of the main ways human beings suffer: loss, grief, illness, and despair in the face of life's apparent meaninglessness. Although many scholars believe the final version of the book dates from the sixth to fifth centuries before Christ, the setting for the story is centuries earlier, maybe around the time of Abraham.

The prose frame at the beginning and end of the book narrates the storyline. Later editors likely inserted poetic middle chapters that recreate lengthy debates between Job and his friends and Job and God. Note

that Job is described as being from the land of Uz in the east, a clue to us that this book's central character was not Jewish. In fact, he was likely an Edomite, a people viewed as the Israelites' enemies.

The book opens with a disagreement between God and Satan, who in this story is an accuser or prosecuting-attorney figure rather than the Bible's later, and more familiar, use of Satan meaning the devil.

1. **READ JOB 1:1–12.** In what ways was Job a righteous man? What surprises you about this conversation between God and Satan?

Notice that God gave Satan permission to make Job suffer in just about every way possible—except for death. The stage is now set for a series of disasters and the report of how Job reacted.

2. **READ JOB 1:13–3:26, 42:10–17**

List all the ways Job suffered. Who was right about Job? God or Satan? How do we know? How do you respond to the end of the story?

First Job lost his servants and livestock; then a strong wind knocked down the house where his children had gathered, killing all of them. Not satisfied with Job's response to these tragedies, Satan inflicted Job with sores all over his body. Even Job's wife urged him to "curse God, and die." Job's three friends spent seven days sitting with Job as he suffered. Eventually Job did curse the day he was born and wished he were in his grave. Skipping to the end, we learn that God restored double all that Job had lost and gave him a long, full life.

At this point we may be somewhat baffled by at least two aspects of the story. First, what kind of divine ruler would let a righteous person like Job be the object of a wager with the trouble-maker Satan and suffer so extensively in the process? Second, how would we feel if we had lost all our children—even if we did end up with twice as many in the end? Not surprisingly, Job had questions, too, as we will see in the next group of passages.

3. **READ JOB 5:17-18 (ELIPHAZ); 8:1-7 (BILDAD); 11:1-6 (ZOPHAR); 7:1-6 AND 21:1-16 (JOB).**

Compare and contrast the explanations of Job's friends with Job's own point of view. What is Job's main question?

After sitting quietly with their suffering friend for seven days, Job's three friends took turns giving advice—and explaining why they believe Job has been so tormented by God. Take time to evaluate what each says and the underlying views of God that their advice implies. Then try to summarize Job's feelings and questions and think about how you might respond in his place.

4. **READ JOB 38:1-7; 40:1-9**

What is God's main point? Does he answer Job's questions and complaints? Does it seem as if God is ignoring Job's suffering?

This portion of Job 38 is one example of God's extended speeches in this latter part of the book of Job. God repeatedly reminded Job of the enormous gap between the power of the Creator and the status of his creature, Job. Job apparently got the message, as he replied to the Lord: "See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further" (Job 40:4-5).

5. **READ JOB 42:1-9.**

How has Job changed? What has he learned? What is the meaning of the Lord's words contrasting the three friends with Job?

As the book comes to a close, we see more evidence of Job's transformation from a man crying out to God for relief from suffering—or at least for an explanation—to one who accepted God's sovereignty. Scholars disagree about whether Job is being fully sincere when he says: "I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:6). But Job did get his wish to see and hear God directly, and doing so transformed Job's relationship with God.

Not only that, but God commended Job for speaking correctly of God, instead of assuming that all misfortune is a punishment from God.

For example, his friend Eliphaz asked: "Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off?" (Job 4:7), instead of taking seriously the possibility that righteous people like Job suffer. We may find his question ridiculous. But the notion that sin was the chief cause for suffering was around in Jesus' day as it is today (John 9:2).

Why righteous people suffer was Job's central question, as we saw in his agonized speech asking why the wicked thrive even though they question serving God (Job 21:7-16). The Book of Job is one of several Bible passages on the issue of theodicy—meaning to justify God. Job questions God's righteousness. If God is all-powerful and all-good, then why do the innocent suffer?

6. **Have you found a satisfying answer to the question:**

Why do innocent people suffer?

Tragedies both natural and human cause us to agonize about why innocent people have to suffer and die. Those of us who have not lived through a tornado or typhoon may find it difficult to imagine suffering on that scale. The catastrophe of the 2010 Haiti earthquake was tragically brought home for many in the ELCA when we learned that one of those who died was Wartburg seminarian Ben Larson, son of former LaCrosse Area Synod (Wis.) Bishop April Ulring Larson and Pastor Judd Larson. With his wife, Renee, and cousin Jonathan, Ben was in Haiti during January term to teach theology to Lutherans.

The first news that came to us ELCA Global Mission staff was that Ben might still be alive. We stopped work to talk and pray together. The next day we learned the excruciating details of Ben's final hours, buried under the rubble of an orphanage, and of the attempts by his wife and cousin to reach him. This terrible loss

or one Lutheran family made immediate and personal
or many more the reality of human suffering in natural
disasters. Ben had touched many lives, from his War-
burg Seminary classmates to the hundreds who had
heard him sing and play guitar at Global Mission Events.

Living through suffering

Even if we never experience a huge natural disaster, we
too live with loss, illness, and trauma that cause suffer-
ing. Where is God in our suffering? One answer comes
from Diane Jacobson, coordinator of the ELCA's
Book of Faith project and writer of *Gather's* 2014 sum-
mer study, "Of Many Generations." She writes that
although Job suffered severely, he "continued to speak
directly to God, praying for justice, relief, and comfort.
True prayer, true speech to and about God, never uses
theological platitudes to deny the reality of the world"
("Lament as true prayer," *The Lutheran*, July 2005, p.7).

Instead of either doubting God's righteousness or
denying the realities of human suffering, we can focus
on Martin Luther's theology of the cross. Concludes
Jacobson: "God comes to us incarnate and open to
suffering.... We come to God boldly, directly, defenses
stripped away, with nothing standing between us and
the Almighty. Standing thus, we can do nothing but
speak the truth from our depth. This isn't to say that
we suddenly have right understanding, only that we
speak honestly of what we know. God meets us there."

7. Take time to ponder and even to write in your journal about
times of suffering when you've found it difficult to pray.
What did you try? Which approaches worked? Which did not?

There are times in the midst of suffering that we simply
have no words for prayer. When that happens, Paul
reminds us: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weak-
ness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought,
but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for
words" (Romans 8:26). And because we are part of the

communal body of Christ, we can be supported by the
many others who are praying on our behalf.

Besides offering opportunities for prayer in wor-
ship, our congregations can become places of healing
from illness, trauma, and grief. Not only can worship
be soothing, as one of my widowed friends has com-
mented about her grief process, prayer can provide
words of comfort and moments of grace. On a practical
level, our churches can serve others by setting up such
supportive websites as CaringBridge.org and TakeThemAMeal.com. Adult education series could include
biblical and theological resources on suffering, advice
about end of life decisions, and practical tips on how
to respond when others suffer. There are good alterna-
tives to such unhelpful comments as those offered to
Job and many of us by well-meaning friends, such as
"This is God's will" or "I know just how you feel." (See
"Comforting and Consoling," p. 26.)

8. Reflect on ways your own congregation or some other close
community reached out to those who are suffering. What more
could be done?

Finding hope and meaning

In some ways the story of Job has a happy ending. But
imagining that we would be given a brand new family
after a disaster is a naïve and false hope in a world where
so many die every year in earthquakes and storms. A
good friend of mine has worked with doctors who treat
the poorest of the poor in Chicago hospitals. She says
that the oncologists tell her they always give their cancer
patients hope; otherwise they could not endure the bru-
tal treatment regime. But it cannot be a false hope.

The Apostle Paul, writing to Roman Christians who
had already begun to experience persecution, knew bet-
ter than to offer false hope. First Paul reminded them
that both sinful Gentiles and sinful Jews could count on
God's grace: "But now, apart from law, the righteous-
ness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the

law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith” (Romans 3:21–26).

Then Paul cited their spiritual ancestor, Abraham, who was counted as righteous by God on the basis of his faith and who was a model of hope. “Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become ‘the father of many nations,’ according to what was said, ‘So numerous shall your descendants be’” (Romans 4:18). In the next chapter of Romans, Paul’s words about hope and suffering illustrate how much complex meaning Paul could pack into only five verses.

9. READ ROMANS 5:1–5.

In Paul’s view, what are some ways Christians can find meaning and hope in the face of suffering? Recall a difficult personal experience when Paul’s words might have helped you. Are there any words here that might not be of help? Have you known people defeated by suffering and left bitter and faithless?

If time permits, participants can paraphrase each verse in their own words. Use the footnotes in your Bible and a Bible dictionary to learn more about how Paul was using such key terms such as: faith, hope, grace, boast, endurance, character, and Holy Spirit.

The good news in this passage is that, like Abraham, all Christians have been justified, put in right relationship with God, on the basis of their faith. But, unlike Abraham, our faith and hope are grounded specifically in God’s grace in Jesus Christ: God’s gift of redeeming us through Christ’s death and resurrection—and God’s promise that we will share “the glory of God” (v. 2). That, says Paul, is what we have to boast about, not pride in our own merits and accomplishments. But we can boast about our sufferings to

the extent that they can be part of the transformation that enables us to have hope. (See “Road-Ready, Life-Tested,” p. 6.)

As theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote: “Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope” (Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, Scribner’s, 1952). As part of the body of Christ, we share in the accomplishments of other believers even if our sufferings and limitations prevent us from accomplishing what we would wish.

We share this hope for redemption and life with God with Job and Paul—and with Jesus himself. We don’t ask for suffering, although we know it comes to everyone. We do ask that it have meaning, as did Jesus on the night before he died. In Gethsemane, Jesus prayed so earnestly that “his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground” (Luke 22:44).

The words of Jesus’ prayer show his hope that his death, if it must happen, would have meaning as God’s will: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). Jesus understands that God wills not his suffering but rather the world-changing effect his suffering would have.

10. READ ROMANS 8:31–39.

Make a list of the forces Paul says are aligned against us.

How do they translate into real threats we may experience today?

How do you respond to Paul’s claim in verses 38–39?

This passage helps us answer the question: What is the nature of our Christian hope? Is it rescue from physical death? Is it freedom from the fear of being sent to hell? Is it the promise of a heaven with pearly gates? Paul does not name any of these. Instead, for Paul the ultimate Christian hope is that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Said my friend who is going on with life after the death of her husband: “If our hope is the outcome that God will be with us that is all I need.”

My first encounter with Romans 8 was in a sixth-grade Sunday school class. Our teacher had spent World War II in the Navy. He told us the story of another sailor who had barely survived. In the midst of a battle in the Pacific, a torpedo destroyed his ship, and this sailor found himself swimming for his life in an ocean of burning fuel. As he swam against the waves toward safety, the sailor recited these words Paul wrote to the Roman Christians: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:38–39). These words and the hope they offered strengthened him in the face of death.

That precise hope was what sustained me many years ago during my husband's serious and lengthy illness with Guillain-Barré Syndrome. I relied on supportive friends to care for our infant son twice each day so that I could be with my husband in the hospital. During the times when his survival was in question and when he was tormented by total paralysis, I remembered and believed the promise of Romans 8 I had learned about in my childhood Sunday school class. Even if my husband were to die, I came to believe that I could trust that God would always be with him.

We rejoiced and continue to be grateful that my husband recovered fully. But like the rest of humanity, we were not done with suffering and loss. Over the past 15 years, we have experienced the deaths of all four of our parents and of his youngest brother. In the memorial services for both my parents, Romans 8 was the key Scripture reading I chose. I thank God for the hope it provides—and that relying on Paul's words in times of loss has transformed my life of faith.

In the media

You may find additional links to help you with the

study on the gathermagazine.org Bible study webpage.

Looking ahead

The hope that Paul describes in Romans 5 is fulfilled for Jesus' grieving disciples when they meet him after he has risen from death. In our next Bible study, accounts of Jesus' resurrection appearances and Paul's explanation of bodily resurrection will help us understand both the basis for trust in God and the life-giving role of Holy Spirit.

Closing prayer

Let us pray together:

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.

Bless the Lord, all his works, in all places of his dominion.

Bless the Lord, O my soul.

(Psalm 103:1–5, 8, 17–18, 22)

Carol Schersten LaHurd is a lifelong teacher. For the past 30 years, she has taught biblical studies, Islam, and interfaith relations in colleges, seminaries, the church, and the wider community. She holds a Ph.D. in New Testament from the University of Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. She is author of "Luke's Vision: The People of God," the 1998 Bible study for *Lutheran Woman Today* (now *Gather*).

ULTIMATE

Perpetua and Felicity were young mothers who died for their faith during a time of persecution in Carthage, northern Africa (modern-day Tunisia). Together with a group of men they are commemorated March 7, the anniversary of their death in A.D. 202 or 203.



PRICE

mothers who died for their faith during a time of persecution in Carthage, northern Africa (modern-day Tunisia). Together with a group of men they are commemorated March 7, the anniversary of their death in A.D. 202 or 203.

by Joy A. Schroeder

Why were Christians persecuted?

The city of Carthage belonged to the Roman Empire. Most Romans worshipped gods such as Jupiter, Juno, and Apollo. They believed these ancient deities protected their empire. Romans called the emperor “divine” in prayers and sacrifices for his well-being. Christians refusing to worship Roman gods or call the emperor “divine” were considered treasonous. Romans also charged Christians with atheism, since having only one God seemed the same as worshipping no gods at all. Some Romans thought Eastern religions were superstitious cults. With roots in Judea and Galilee, Christianity was regarded as Eastern. Outsiders speculated that Christians, who met clandestinely, committed depraved acts like incest or cannibalism.

While there were no widespread, systematic attempts to stamp out Christianity at that time, Christians experienced sporadic, localized attacks. Persecutors desecrated Christian graves and paraded offensive caricatures of Jesus. Sometimes Christians were arrested and executed. Roman authorities often targeted new converts before baptism, trying to intimidate them into

not converting. Early Christians avoided martyrdom when they could do so without denying their faith. However, when arrested and given a choice between dying or denying Christ, they courageously chose death, confident in Christ’s promises of resurrection.

A mother's diary

Perpetua and most of her companions were *catechumens*—individuals instructed in the Christian faith, preparing for baptism. Felicity was a slave, eight months pregnant. Their companions included teen-aged Saturninus and Secundulus, the slave Revocatus, and their teacher Saturus. While imprisoned, the catechumens were baptized, perhaps by Christian ministers visiting them.

The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity, a Latin document, tells their story. Perpetua’s eight-chapter prison diary comprises nearly half of the *Passion*. Most scholars think Perpetua herself wrote the diary of her visions and experiences, the earliest known writing by a Christian woman. The *Passion*’s description of their martyrdom was written by an anonymous admirer who was an eyewitness or heard the story from others.

Perpetua, whose name means *enduring*, was a 2-year-old married woman from an elite family. She had an infant son who was still nursing. The *Passion* mentions her parents and brothers, but her husband is strikingly absent. He was not deceased, since Perpetua called a *matron*, not a widow. Perhaps he had left her because she converted to Christianity. Some Roman husbands separated from their wives for this reason.

Perpetua's diary describes the prison's crowded, miserable conditions. The darkness was terrifying; the heat, stifling. Perpetua worried about her baby, who remained with her parents. Eventually deacons from Perpetua's community bribed the guards to move the Christians to a more comfortable part of the prison. Prison officials let Perpetua's baby, who had been fainting from hunger, visit her so she could nurse him. Although her family would have hired a wet nurse, perhaps the child refused another woman's milk. When he finally held her infant, the relieved Perpetua wrote, "Suddenly my prison became a palace." Several days later, when she had to return him to her family, she felt reassured that he seemed ready to be weaned. She regarded this as a miraculous sign of God's care.

Who was Felicity?

The slave Felicity, whose name means *happiness*, was pregnant when arrested. We do not know whether Felicity belonged to Perpetua's household. The *Passion* does not say who her baby's father was. Perhaps he was a fellow slave. Although slaves could not legally marry, some managed to form lifelong partnerships. Or Felicity may have been abused by her master. Church rules about admission to baptism were strict about sexual behavior but recognized slaves' vulnerability to exploitation. Slave women in this situation were to be welcomed to baptism, respected as sisters in Christ.

Because Roman law prohibited executions of pregnant women, Felicity feared her pregnancy would delay her martyrdom, meaning she would die apart from

her companions, whose courage would strengthen her faith. Her friends prayed the baby would be born early. Their prayers were answered, but the childbirth was difficult. As Felicity suffered in labor pains, a guard taunted her: "You think you are suffering now. What will you do when you are thrown to the wild animals?" Felicity answered that Jesus would suffer with her, giving her strength during her martyrdom. Felicity gave birth to a daughter, who was raised by a woman from their congregation.

Perpetua's visions

While imprisoned, Perpetua had several visionary dreams. In one, she climbed a treacherous ladder, representing martyrdom, to a beautiful garden. There a gray-haired shepherd, symbolizing God, was milking sheep. The shepherd offered her cheese curds made from the sheep's milk. Perpetua awoke from her dream with a sweet taste in her mouth. Early Christians offered sips of honey-sweetened milk to the newly baptized to represent God's nourishment of "newborn" Christians. Perpetua's dream, shortly after her baptism, may have been inspired by this ritual.

The day before her martyrdom, Perpetua dreamed she was transformed into a male athlete in an arena. Her clothes were removed. Assistants rubbed her with oil. Ancient athletes wrestled nude and believed that externally-applied oil strengthened their muscles. Similarly, Christians believed that oil anointing newly baptized individuals symbolized the strength offered by the Holy Spirit. In her dream, Perpetua was pitted against an Egyptian wrestler, representing the devil. After fierce combat, she defeated him and walked victoriously from the arena through the Gate of Life. In ancient times, triumphant gladiators exited the arena through a doorway called the Gate of Life. Those who died were dragged out through the Gate of Death. After her martyrdom, Perpetua's body would be carried through the arena's Gate of Death, but her dream showed a heav-

only reality different from earthly appearances. Faithful martyrs were promised true life with Christ.

Martyrs for Christ

Crowds loved spectacles in the arena. Wealthy patrons sponsored gladiatorial combats and displays of exotic animals. Sometimes unarmed convicts, pitted against ferocious beasts, were mauled for the audience's gruesome entertainment.

Perpetua's male companions were pitted against a bear, boar, and leopard, which injured but did not kill them. Officials "matched" Perpetua and Felicity with a female animal—a mad heifer. The ferocious cow charged at Perpetua, throwing her into the air. Landing on her back, Perpetua tried to cover her exposed legs with her torn tunic. (Though Perpetua had dreamed she was a male athlete wrestling in the nude, ancient women were anxious to preserve their modesty.) Perpetua then asked for a hairpin to fix her disheveled hair so she would not appear sorrowful. Loose hair was a sign of women's mourning. After the heifer pushed Felicity to the ground, Perpetua took her hand, helping her up. They had survived the heifer's attack.

At the end of the spectacle, the Christians were lined up for execution. Before dying by the gladiator's sword, Perpetua and her companions shared a ritual kiss of peace. The inexperienced gladiator failed to kill Perpetua with his first blow. Perpetua herself guided his trembling hand to her throat and she finally perished.

Ancient martyrdom literature reflects a worldview that is strange to modern readers. The martyrs' words and actions may not make sense to people of our day—or to the non-Christians of their own time. Though we should not downplay their suffering, the martyrs understood their deaths as victory. The forces of evil wanted them to deny Christ, but they remained faithful even to the point of death. Early Christians regarded the brave martyrs as heroes, telling these stories to celebrate how God worked in the lives of believers. Mar-

tyrs' stories also helped people imagine how to respond if they themselves faced persecution.

The New Prophecy

Perpetua and Felicity may have been part of the "New Prophecy," a Christian movement started 40 years earlier by spiritual leaders Priscilla, Maximilla, and Montanus. Opponents called the movement "Montanism" after the male founder. New Prophecy members believed the Holy Spirit continued to speak through visions, prophecies, and dreams. Women served as prophets, priests, and bishops.

Some Montanists used cheese curds instead of wine in the Lord's Supper. Opponents nicknamed them "bread-and-cheesers." Mainstream theologians acknowledged that the New Prophecy had corrected beliefs about Christ and the Trinity but condemned Montanist practices. The *Passion's* narrator said that Christians should honor "new prophecies"—a clue about his New Prophecy sympathies. At the time of Perpetua and Felicity's martyrdom, the division between New Prophecy and mainstream Christians in North Africa may not yet have been significant. Both Montanists and mainstream Christians honored Perpetua and Felicity.

Nourishing the faithful

The theme of milk and nourishment is found throughout the *Passion*. Perpetua is concerned about nursing her child. God, a shepherd milking sheep, feeds the newly baptized Perpetua with cheese. Perpetua and Felicity's story shows that God strengthens and nourishes the faith of Christians in the midst of persecution. The stories of martyrs can inspire and nurture our own faith as we face difficulties in life.

The Rev. Dr. Joy A. Schroeder, an ELCA pastor, teaches church history at Trinity Lutheran Seminary and Capital University. She is the author of *Deborah's Daughters: Gender Politics and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, 2014).



RACE NOTES

Weaving the Stories

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



I went to college before

schools offered women's studies programs. The closest I got to a course like that was the first ever offered at my alma mater—Women in American History. It was eye-opening, and I have been devoted to all aspects of women's history since. On Facebook I follow the National Women's History Museum that offers daily posts highlighting women and their contributions to our collective past. Though I consider myself a student of women's history, I'm regularly amazed by the museum's posts because I've never heard of many of these women and their great contributions. How diminished our understanding of the past would be without their stories.

The National Women's History Project (nwhp.org) describes why women's history is important. "The impact of women's history might seem abstract to some, and less pressing than the immediate struggles of working women today. But to ignore the vital role that women's dreams and accomplishments play in our own lives would be a mistake. We draw strength and inspiration from those who came before us—and those remarkable women working among us today.

Yes, we draw strength and inspiration from those who came before us. Who are the women from whom you draw strength and inspiration? Since it is March and Women's History Month, I invite you to spend time answering that question, both personally and in your congregational unit. The 2015 theme for Women's History Month is "Weaving

the Stories of Women's Lives," and that offers us a great jumping-off point.

I took a course in American Lutheran history once and had an assignment to complete an oral history of someone from my congregation. I interviewed Dorothy, then in her 70s, who had grown up in that congregation. With my prompting questions, Dorothy recalled as a child coloring during long sermons preached in German, before confirmation, the joy of her wedding, the baptisms of her daughters, and more. The congregation was soon to celebrate its 90th anniversary and Dorothy was able to offer reflections on more than three-quarters of the congregation's life.

Dorothy and I were in the same circle. She was the only one in her 70s, and she regularly thanked the rest of us—in our 50s, 40s and 30s—for "letting her" be part of the circle. "I learn so much from you," she would say. Ah, but we all learned so much from Dorothy.

Use this month to discover stories about the women and girls in your congregation who have contributed greatly to ministry in your community but who have done so with little fanfare or recognition. Interview older women. Document their lives. This could turn into a great intergenerational event. Young women and girls could use new technologies to collect the stories. Consider sharing these stories in a written format too. What a gift this would be to your whole congregation! 🌸

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.



AMEN!

Growing through Suffering

by Catherine Malotky

This is the mystery, God. You are no puppeteer. You do not consult with evil forces and plot against us. You do not punish, but love. You do not set a path before us, nor play with fate. You are before us and behind us and with us as well. Only you, the creator of the whole universe, can do this.

Our suffering is sometimes of our own making, natural consequences of poor choices. As when we were children and touched a hot burner, we would get burned. Sometimes the sin of our forebears weighs on us—think of the despoiling of our air and water by a world designed for fossil fuel consumption. They did not know then what the consequences would be for us. We know now and think of the generations to come. Sometimes our suffering lingers because we do not come to terms with it and refuse to heal the wounds we bear. And sometimes, God, our suffering is inexplicable, crummy luck.

God, you have instructed us through the experiences of others. Victor Frankel learned as he languished in Nazi concentration camps, that finally, he could choose how he would respond to his situation even if it was brutal and cruel. Job chose to see grace in God's almighty presence, to trust that he was not without value, in spite of all his losses, because God was with him.

God, I trust your power of redemption when I awaken from grief and darkness and see how I have changed, grown, and become more than I was before. In Jesus I see your redemption

in the flesh, promising that from every death will come life. I believe.

We can ask "why" of our suffering. With the psalmists who sang laments, we can struggle to see. In doing so, we can learn how we have contributed. We can learn, flex, improve. And, sometimes, we can learn that there is nothing more we can do but acknowledge your presence and love. We can choose to see you with us. We believe.

And we can respond with hope. So many suffer, too often as a consequence of our choices, our cultural biases, our short-sightedness. So many suffer, and we can respond to these neighbors with compassion and courage. We can examine how we contribute, and we can change our ways. We can reach out with support and resources. We can believe through our actions and give witness to God's compassion and justice.

Jesus, you entered our world as we are, as flesh and blood. You suffered, as we do. You gave of yourself over and over again, welcoming those who were left out, healing those who were sick, and teaching those eager to know. May we show such courage. May our tent be so welcoming. May our generosity be unbound. In this our suffering is redeemed. If life is better for another, it will be better for us as well. This is the mystery of the body of Christ. We are all one with you. Thanks be to God. Amen. ✠

The Rev. Catherine Malotky, an ELCA pastor, serves at Luther Seminary as a philanthropic adviser. She has served as a parish pastor, editor, teacher, and retreat leader.

DRUMMING UP SUBSCRIPTIONS

The women of the Grand Canyon Synod love their *Gather* magazine, and they want their friends and family to share in the joy. They began a drive to drum up more subscriptions last fall, according to Suki Kisling, vice president of the synod and a member of Desert Hills Lutheran Church, Green Valley, Ariz. At this writing in December, Suki's unit has garnered more than 100 new subscriptions.

Perhaps your unit should consider joining the competition. To subscribe, call 800-328-4648 or go online at www.gathermagazine.org. Print subscribers have free access to the digital editions on computers and through apps in the iTunes and Google Play stores or on your Kindle Fire.



Photo by Suki Kisling

Moravian Bishop Kay Ward, author of the 2013-2014 *Gather* magazine Bible study, "In Good Company: Stories of Biblical Women," is flanked by Grand Canyon Synod President Laura Krueger, left, and former Women of the ELCA executive board member JoAnn Fuchs at a recent Grand Canyon Women of the ELCA convention in Flagstaff, Ariz.

DIRECTORY OF READER SERVICES

SUBSCRIPTION OFFICE

Change of address, renewals, questions about your subscription, and new subscription orders must be addressed to our subscription order center at Augsburg Fortress. 1 year/10 issues \$15

800-328-4648

Gather Subscription Order Center

Box 1553

Minneapolis, MN 55440-8730

subscriptions@augsburghfortress.org

Audio CD Edition, \$18

800-328-4648

Permission to reprint articles

800-421-0239

copyright@augsburghfortress.org

Bible Study Resource Orders

Bible Study Leader Guides, Companion Bibles, etc.

800-638-3522 ext. 2580

Like Us on Facebook

www.facebook.com/gathermagazine

Bible Study Videos

gathermagazine.org

Gather Editorial Office

For editorial feedback, magazine promotion questions, article suggestions, or advertising inquiries write or email:

Gather Editorial Office

Women of the ELCA

8765 W. Higgins Rd.

Chicago, IL 60631-4189

800-638-3522, ext. 2730

gather@elca.org gathermagazine.org

Stir the spirit within! Go to www.boldcafe.org.

#BXNRXWW *****SCH 5-DIGIT 94706 FSS
#81000056489# 1000000547 MAR16 1286
GRADUATE THEOL UNION LIB - SERIALS
2400 RIDGE RD
BERKELEY CA 94709-1212

1286
P206
599
411

Please direct all changes of address to Augsburg Fortress, Publishers (see Reader Services).

A resource that helps congregations and families with faith formation

The Little Lutheran provides children ages 1 to 7 with theologically sound, age-appropriate Bible stories, songs, Christian history, global mission stories and more. A gift of 10 issues a year tells children just how much God loves them and that Jesus is their savior and friend.

Group subscriptions (five or more) are \$15.95 for 10 issues a year. Individual and multiple-year subscriptions are also available.

Visit www.thelittlelutheran.org or call 800-328-4648.

The Little Lutheran

